

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to an image processing method and apparatus, and to a storage medium storing a program realizing the image processing method. More particularly, the invention relates to an image processing method and apparatus for extracting objects from moving images, and to a storage medium storing software program codes for executing the image processing method.

15 A compression coding method has been studied
recently by which moving images are compression encoded
in the unit of an object which is assumed to be a
constituent of a moving image. Standardization works
are under progress as MPEG-4. Since an object can take
20 an arbitrary shape, it is expressed by a combination of
data called a shape, which is representative of shape
information and data called a texture, which is
representative of the contents of an image.

Known object generation methods include a
25 chromakey separation method, a method of generating an
object through computer graphics (CG), a method of
extracting an object from a natural image, and the

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With computer graphics (CG), an image having a desired shape can be generated at any time so that a particular extraction method is not necessary. In the case of an animation image, each cell image is considered as an object so that the image can be processed in a manner similar to CG.

As a means for extracting an object from a natural image, active contour model energy minimization, called a snake, is well known (e.g., "Snakes: Active Contour Models", by Michael Kass, Andrew Witkin, and Demetri Terzopoulos, International Journal of Computer Vision, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 321-331, 1988).

With the snake, an energy function is defined which takes a minimum energy when a contour (outline) is extracted, and a local minimum is calculated through iteration using a proper initial value. The energy function is defined by a linear sum of an external energy which is restriction on passing an edge point and an internal energy which is restriction on smoothness.

In order to use a snake, it is necessary to roughly designate an outline of an object to be

extracted, as an initial outline. In the case of a moving image, it is necessary to set an initial outline of each frame. However, automatic setting is possible by using the extraction results of a previous frame as an initial value of a current frame. Techniques of obtaining an outline between frames are called tracking.

These extraction methods are all associated with severe problems. Namely, the chromakey method requires a uniform background color, and if it is required that extraction is to be performed at a high precision, a studio set of a robust scale is required. If the object contains the background color, the object cannot be correctly extracted so that the color of the object is limited.

Although computer graphics and animation do not require an extraction process, they are accompanied with a fatal problem that the quality of images is far inferior to natural images picked-up with a video camera.

The method of extracting an object from a natural image has on one hand the advantages that restriction on image contents is small and versatile processing is possible, and on the other hand the disadvantages that it is necessary to designate an initial outline correctly to some degree. The reason is because the calculation results of a local minimum of an active outline model are greatly influenced by the initial

outline. In other words, if the initial outline is different from an actual object outline, the convergence results of calculation do not coincide with the actual object outline. Generally, a user sets an initial outline through graphical user interface (GUI) such as a mouse. Manual setting of an initial outline is not easy and initial outlines are hard to be set with good reproductivity. The more complicated the outline shape, the larger the user burden.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of the invention to provide an image processing apparatus and method capable of extracting an object correctly with less burden on user manipulation, and to provide a storage medium storing a program realizing such a method.

In order to achieve the above object, according to one aspect of the present invention, there is provided an image processing apparatus and method wherein consecutive image data is input, the input image data is divided into blocks each constituted of a plurality of pixels, a motion vector of each block is detected, a border block is judged in accordance with the detected motion vector, the border block forming a boundary area between an object area and a background area corresponding to a background of the object area, and image data in the object area is extracted in

accordance with the judged border block.

According to another aspect of the present invention, there is provided a storage medium which stores program codes for image processing steps, the
5 program codes comprising codes for an input step of inputting consecutive image data, codes for a dividing step of dividing the image data into blocks each constituted of a plurality of pixels, codes for a
10 detecting step of detecting a motion vector of each block, codes for a judging step of judging a border block in accordance with the motion vector detected by the detecting step, the border block forming a boundary area between an object area and a background area corresponding to a background of the object area, and
15 codes for an extracting step of extracting image data in the object area in accordance with the border block judged by the judging step.

Other objects, features and advantages of the present invention will become apparent from the
20 following detailed description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a block diagram showing the structure of
25 an image processing apparatus according to a first embodiment of the invention.

Fig. 2 is a flow chart illustrating an object

extracting process to be executed by the image processing apparatus constructed as shown in Fig. 1.

Fig. 3 is a schematic diagram illustrating settings of a start frame and an end frame.

5 Fig. 4 is a diagram illustrating an example of dividing a target frame into blocks.

Fig. 5 is a diagram showing an example of an image of a sample frame.

10 Fig. 6 is a histogram showing blocks classified by motion vectors.

Fig. 7 is a diagram showing an example of block classification.

Fig. 8 is a diagram showing another example of block classification.

15 Fig. 9 is a diagram showing an example of an initial outline according to the first embodiment.

Figs. 10A, 10B, 10C and 10D are schematic diagrams illustrating convergence of an outline according to the first embodiment.

20 Fig. 11 is a flow chart illustrating a block classifying process at Step S9 shown in Fig. 2.

Fig. 12 is a diagram showing an example of block classification of the histogram shown in Fig. 6.

25 Fig. 13 is a flow chart illustrating the block classifying process according to another embodiment.

Fig. 14 is a flow chart illustrating the block classifying process according to another embodiment.

Fig. 15 is a diagram showing an example of the results of the provisional block classifying process illustrated in Fig. 14.

Fig. 16 is a flow chart illustrating a process of finally determining provisional blocks.

Fig. 17 is a diagram showing an example of the results of the process illustrated in Fig. 16.

Fig. 18 is a flow chart illustrating the characteristic operation according to a second embodiment of the invention.

Fig. 19 is a schematic diagram illustrating block re-division.

Fig. 20 is a schematic diagram illustrating an example of block positions of an initial outline according to the second embodiment.

Fig. 21 is a diagram showing an example of an initial outline according to the second embodiment.

Figs. 22A, 22B and 22C are schematic diagrams illustrating convergence of an outline according to the second embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Embodiments of the invention will be described in detail with reference to the accompanying drawings.

Fig. 1 is a block diagram showing the structure of an image processing apparatus according to the first embodiment of the invention.

Referring to Fig. 1, an image input unit 10 includes at least an image reproducing apparatus such as a video camera, a digital VTR and a DVD, and supplies moving image data to a control unit 11. The control unit 11 includes a memory 12 for temporarily storing the moving image data supplied from the image input unit 10, and controls the supply of moving image data and the operation of each circuit and component. The memory 12 temporarily stores image data of several frames input from the image input unit 10. A motion amount detection circuit 13 detects a motion amount (motion vector) in a desired frame in the unit of a block, by using image data of a plurality frames temporarily stored in the memory 12.

In accordance with the detection results of the motion amount detection circuit 13, a boundary setting circuit 14 obtains a boundary between a background area and an object area. An initial outline setting circuit 15 sets an initial outline in accordance with the boundary obtained by the boundary setting circuit 14. An outline extraction circuit 16 converges the initial outline toward the outline of an actual object and supplies the convergence results to the control unit 11 as outline information. The outline information obtained by the outline extraction circuit 16 is set as the next frame initial outline to the initial outline setting circuit 16 at the timing of a frame update.

In accordance with the outline information obtained by the outline extraction circuit 20, the control unit 11 reads the image data of an object from the memory 12 and supplies it to an encoding unit 17. The control unit 11 also supplies the encoding unit 17 with background data excepting image data of the object and with shape information corresponding to the outline information obtained by the outline extraction circuit 16.

The encoding unit 17 encodes image data of the object, image data of the background, and shape information, independently from each other. A transmission unit 18 externally transmits the data encoded by the encoding unit 17 over the Internet, by using a predetermined transmission format. A recording unit 19 records the data encoded by the encoding unit 17 in a hard disk, a memory, an optical disk, or the like.

Fig. 2 is a flow chart illustrating an object
extracting process to be executed by the image
25 processing apparatus constructed as shown in Fig. 1.

First, a start frame and an end frame are determined (Step S1, Step S2). These Steps define a

period during which an extracting object exists. For example, as shown in Fig. 3, using a graphical user interface which displays a series of frames at the same time on the screen of the display unit 17, the start frame and end frame can therefore be set with ease from the operation unit 18.

Next, a top frame containing the extracting object is set as a target frame (Step S3). The start frame is generally the target frame.

As shown in Fig. 4, the target frame is divided into blocks along horizontal and vertical directions. The block size is arbitrary. For example, assuming that the image size is 720×480 pixels and the block size is 16×16 pixels, the number of blocks is $(720/16) \times (480/16) = 1350$.

If R, G and B are used for color space representation, the total number of blocks per one frame is $1350 \times 3 = 4050$. If a format of luminance components and color difference components of 4 : 2 : 2 is used, the total number of blocks is $1350 \times 2 = 2700$. If only the luminance signal is used, the total number of blocks is 1350.

After the process at Step S4, a sample frame is set (Step S5). Generally a frame adjacent in the time axis to the target frame is used as the sample frame. In the example of the moving images shown in Fig. 3, the sample frame is the frame shown in Fig. 5 in which

the object moved to the right relative to the target frame shown in Fig. 4.

After the process at Step S5, the motion amount detection circuit 13 detects a motion vector for each
5 block in the sample frame (Step S6).

On the assumption that a motion of the target is in conformity with two-dimensional affine transformation, the following equations stand between the position (x, y) on the target frame and the
10 position (X, Y) on the sample frame:

$$X = a \times x + b \times y + c \quad \dots (1)$$

$$Y = d \times x + e \times y + f \quad \dots (2)$$

On the assumption that the motion is only a parallel movement, the equations (1) and (2) can be simplified
15 to:

$$X = x + c \quad \dots (3)$$

$$Y = y + f \quad \dots (4)$$

A square sum of differences is calculated by moving the search area in accordance with the above-described
20 equations, and the position at which the square sum of differences is minimum in the search area is determined as the position with matching and the motion vector value is stored.

After the motion vector values of all blocks in
25 the frames are obtained at Step S6, the boarder setting circuit 14 classifies the moving vectors (Step S7).
The substantially same motion vector values are

registered in the same group. If the search area is a range of ± 16 pixels in the horizontal and vertical directions and a parallel movement with one pixel precision is performed, then the types of motion
5 vectors to be generated are $33 \times 33 = 1089$ patterns. Fig. 6 is a histogram showing an example of motion vectors in blocks classified in the above-described manner. The abscissa of Fig. 6 represents a motion
10 frequency or the number of blocks. Along the abscissa, the motion vectors are arranged in the order of larger occurrence frequency.

If a dominant motion is not detected in the whole frame area (Step S8), the flow returns to Step S5
15 whereat the sample frame is changed to again calculate motion vectors (Step S6) and classify motion vectors (Step S7).

If a dominant motion is detected in the whole frame area (Step S8), the blocks are classified into
20 three groups: background blocks, object (foreground) blocks and border blocks including the background and object (Step S9). This grouping method will be later described in detail. For example, as shown in Fig. 7, border blocks surround foreground blocks, and
25 background blocks surround the border blocks. Depending upon division into blocks, the foreground block is not surrounded by the border block in some

cases as shown in Fig. 8. Such cases may occur when most of blocks are background blocks and there are only a small number of blocks containing the object, or conversely, when most of blocks contain the object and there are only a small number of background blocks.

Next, the initial outline setting circuit 15 sets an initial outline.

The blocks judged as the border blocks contain a border line in its area. Therefore, points constituting the initial outline are set in each block (Step S10). If the background object is contact with the object block, points constituting the initial outline are set on the contact line (Step S11). These points are sequentially interconnected to form a closed loop which is set as the initial outline (Step S12).

Fig. 9 shows an example of setting an initial outline. The border line on which the background block and object block contact each other is used as the initial outline, and in the border blocks, the initial line is set so as to divide the inside and outside of the object blocks equally.

Next, the outline extraction circuit 16 converges the initial outline set as described above into an object outline (Step S13). For example, a process called a snake is executed.

Generally, the snake is an outline extraction model whose shape is determined as a minimum energy

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... (7)

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Edge indicates a luminance gradient. The snake receives an attraction force to an edge through minimization. γ is a weight coefficient of an image energy.

5 Figs. 10A to 10D illustrate how the initial outline converges so as to match the object outline.

 After the outline is determined in this way (Step S14), the first frame object extracting process is completed. In accordance with the extraction results, 10 the initial outline of the next frame is set (Step S15). In this case, according to the simplest method, the extraction results of the outline of the previous frame are set as the new initial outline.

 The target frame is updated (Step S16) to execute 15 again Steps S13 to S16. When the target frame becomes the end frame and the processes at Steps S13 to S16 are executed (Step S17), it means that the object extracting process was completed for all frames, to thereby terminate a series of processes.

20 Next, with reference to Fig. 11, the block classifying process at Step S9 shown in Fig. 2 will be described. Fig. 11 is a flow chart illustrating the block classifying process at Step S9 shown in Fig. 2. The flow chart shown in Fig. 11 is only illustrative, 25 and it is conceivable that many methods may be used for the classification of this type.

 A block having the largest occurrence frequency of

motion vector is determined as the background block
(Steps S21, S22). A block having a second largest
occurrence frequency of motion vector is determined as
the foreground block (Steps 23, S24). A block neither
5 the background block nor the foreground block is
determined as the border block (Step S25). All blocks
are classified in accordance with the above-described
criterion (Step S26). An example of classification of
motion vectors shown in Fig. 6 is therefore classified
10 into background blocks, foreground blocks and border
blocks as shown in Fig. 12.

This classifying process relies on the assumption
that the background occupies the broadest area in each
frame. Therefore, the block having the second largest
15 occurrence frequency of motion vector is determined as
the foreground block. If there is only one object in a
frame, the number of blocks having the third or more
largest occurrent frequency of motion vector becomes
extremely small. These blocks are those whose
20 corresponding parts were not able to be found. If a
block contains both the background area and object
area, such the block cannot be found in the search area
of the sample frame. Therefore, this block takes one
of a variety of motion vector values. This block is
25 therefore determined as the border block.

In this embodiment, the assumption is made that
the background occupies the broadest area in each

frame. If the foreground occupies the broadest area in each frame, a block having the largest occurrence frequency of motion vector is determined as the foreground block, and a block having the second largest occurrence frequency of motion vector is determined as the background block.

Also in this embodiment, although discrimination between the block classified into the background block and the block classified into the foreground block is determined in accordance with the occurrence frequency of motion vector, the position information may be taken into consideration to determine a block in contact with the frame side, as the background block.

Fig. 13 is a flow chart illustrating the block classifying process according to another embodiment of the invention.

A block having the largest occurrence frequency of motion vector is determined as the background block (Steps S31, S32). A block which is not a block having the first largest occurrence frequency of motion vector but adjacent to the block having the largest occurrence frequency of motion vector is determined as the border block (Steps 33, S34). A block neither the background block nor the border block is determined as the foreground block (Steps S33, S35). All blocks are classified in accordance with the above-described criterion (Step S36).

With the method illustrated in Fig. 13, a block adjacent to the background block is determined as the border block. Conversely, after the foreground block is determined, a block adjacent to the foreground block
5 may be determined as the border block, with expected similar or the same results.

Another grouping method is to calculate a similarity degree of motion vector of a block having the third or more largest occurrence frequency of
10 motion vector and classify the block either to the block having the first largest occurrence frequency or to the block having the second largest occurrence frequency. Fig. 14 is a flow chart illustrating such a method.

15 A block having the largest occurrence frequency of motion vector is determined as the background block (Steps S41, S42). A block having a second largest occurrence frequency of motion vector is determined as the foreground block (Steps S43, S44). If a block
20 having the third or more largest occurrence frequency of motion vector is detected (Step S43), motion vector similarity degrees of the motion vector of such the block to those of the background and foreground blocks are calculated (Step S45). This calculation is made to
25 judge whether the motion vector value of that block is nearer either to the motion vector value of the group having the first largest occurrence frequency or to the

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motion vector value of the group having the second largest occurrence frequency. For example, the distance between motion vectors is calculated from the inner product thereof. If it is judged that the motion vector value is nearer to the motion vector of the group having the first largest occurrence frequency (Step S46), then the block is provisionally determined as the background block (provisional background block) (Step S47), whereas if it is judged as nearer to the motion vector of the group having the second largest occurrence frequency (Step S46), then the block is provisionally determined as the foreground block (provisional foreground block) (Step S48). The above processes are executed for all blocks (Step S49).

15 An example of the provisional classification results by the method illustrated in Fig. 14 is shown in Fig. 15. Blocks adjacent to both the block having the first largest occurrence frequency of motion vector and the block having the second largest occurrence frequency of motion vector (provisional background and foreground blocks shown in Fig. 14) become the border blocks.

25 Fig. 16 is a flow chart illustrating the operation of finally determining the border block by using the classification results obtained by the method illustrated in Fig. 14. It is judged whether the subject block is the provisional background block or

not (Step S51). If it is the provisional background block (Step S51), it is checked whether the provisional background block is adjacent to the foreground block (Step S52). If the provisional background block is adjacent to the foreground block (Step S52), this block is determined as the border block (Step S53), whereas if it is not adjacent to the foreground block (Step S52), this block is determined as the background block (Step S54). For the provisional foreground block, a similar operation is performed (Step S55). If this provisional foreground block is adjacent to the background block (Step S56), it is determined as the border block (Step S57), whereas if not, it is determined as the foreground block (Step S58). The blocks other than the provisional blocks are maintained as previously determined. The above processes are executed for all blocks (Step S59). The final classification results for the example shown in Fig. 15 given by the method illustrated in Fig. 16 are shown in Fig. 17.

An image processing apparatus according to the second embodiment will be described. The structure of the apparatus is the same as that shown in Fig. 1, and so the description thereof is omitted.

Fig. 18 is a flow chart illustrating only the characteristic operation of the image processing apparatus of the second embodiment. Namely, the flow

chart shown in Fig. 18 is used for an alternative of the processes at Steps S5 to S8 shown in Fig. 2, and the other processes are similar to those shown in the flow chart of Fig. 2.

5 Similar to Steps S5 to S8 shown in Fig. 2, a sample frame is first set to calculate and classify motion vectors of all blocks (Steps S61 to S64). It is checked what block group the occurrence frequency of motion vector of each block belongs to (Steps S65, 10 S66). Blocks having the second largest occurrent frequency of motion vector and being adjacent to the block having the first largest occurrence frequency (Steps S66, S67) and blocks having the third or more largest occurrence frequency of motion vector (Step 15 S66) are checked whether they can be divided again (Step S68). Each dividable block is divided further (Step S69). For example, if the block size is 16×16 , this block is divided into four 8×8 blocks.

 After the block is divided further (Step S69), the 20 motion vector is again calculated and classified for all blocks (Steps S62 to S64). So long as each of blocks having the second largest occurrent frequency of motion vector and being adjacent to the block having the first largest occurrence frequency (Steps S66, S67) 25 and blocks having the third or more largest occurrence frequency of motion vector (Step S66) can be re-divided (Step S68), the dividable block is divided further to

repeat the processes at Steps S62 to S67.

By recursively dividing the block in this way, it is possible to reduce an area of the border block.

If it is judged that the block is no more
5 dividable (Step S68), the group attributes of the
blocks (including re-divided blocks) are maintained and
the next block is processed in a similar manner
described above (Steps S65 to S68).

If all blocks inclusive of re-divided blocks in
10 the frame are processed (Step S70), then the sample
frame is changed (Step S61) to repeat similar processes
described above. If all sample frames are processed
(Step S71), this routine is terminated to follow the
processes at Step S9 and succeeding Steps shown in Fig.
15 2.

Fig. 19 shows an example of the processed results
by the method illustrated in Fig. 18. The block having
the third or more largest occurrence frequency of
motion vector is re-divided and also the block having
20 the second largest occurrence frequency of motion
vector and being adjacent to the block having the first
largest occurrence frequency of motion vector, are re-
divided. After re-division and re-classification, the
object judgement is executed to determine the block
25 having the first largest occurrent frequency of motion
vector as the background block, the block having the
second largest occurrent frequency of motion vector as

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the foreground block, and the block other than those blocks described above as the border block.

Fig. 20 shows only the blocks used for initial outline setting of the example shown in Fig. 19. Fig. 21 shows an initial outline obtained by the example shown in Fig. 20. It can be understood that the initial outline can be obtained with a higher precision than that of the initial outline (Fig. 9) of the first embodiment. Figs. 22A to 22C illustrate convergence of the initial outline shown in Fig. 21 into the outline of the object.

The invention is applicable to a system constituted of a plurality of apparatuses or to a single apparatus. The scope of the invention also includes the case wherein a computer (CPU or MPU) of the apparatus or system connected to various devices realizing the functions of each embodiment described above, is supplied with software program codes realizing the functions of each embodiment and the various devices are operated in accordance with programs stored in the computer of the system or apparatus.

In such a case, the program codes themselves realize the functions of each embodiment. The program codes themselves and means for supplying the computer with the program codes, e.g., a storage medium storing such program codes, constitute the present invention.

The storage medium for storing such program codes may be a floppy disk, a hard disk, an optical disk, a magnetooptical disk, a CD-ROM, a magnetic tape, a nonvolatile memory card, a ROM or the like.

5 It is obvious that an embodiment of the invention
also includes not only the case wherein the functions
of each embodiment can be realized by executing the
program codes read by the computer, but also the case
wherein the functions of each embodiment can be
10 realized by the program codes in cooperation with an OS
(operating system) running on the computer, application
software or the like.

It is obvious that the scope of the invention also contains the case wherein the functions of each
15 embodiment can be realized by writing the supplied program codes into a memory of a function expansion board inserted into the computer or of a function expansion unit connected to the computer, and
20 thereafter by executing a portion or the whole of actual processes by a CPU of the function expansion board or function expansion unit.

The shape and structure of each device of the
embodiments are only given for illustrative purposes
only for embodying the invention and are not to be
25 construed as imposing any limitation to the technical
scope of the invention. The invention can therefore be
embodied in various ways without departing from the

As described so far, according to the embodiments, the initial outline of a top frame used in extracting an object of a moving image can be automatically set with a high precision. Accordingly, a user burden can be reduced considerably. Since the initial outline can be set automatically, the initial outline can be obtained with good reproductivity.

In other words, the foregoing description of
10 embodiments has been given for illustrative purposes
only and not to be construed as imposing any limitation
in every respect.

The scope of the invention is, therefore, to be determined solely by the following claims and not limited by the text of the specifications and alterations made within a scope equivalent to the scope of the claims fall within the true spirit and scope of the invention.